

Equity Alert



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THE EDUCATION TRUST - WEST

Equity Alert: Maximizing Equity for Young Learners as California Implements Universal Transitional Kindergarten

In 2021, California made historic investments in early learning to expand transitional kindergarten (TK) to serve all of California’s 4-year-olds. Transitional kindergarten began in California in 2012 as a free public school program for 4-year-olds who were not yet eligible for kindergarten (a non-compulsory grade). Yet by 2019, just 28 percent of Black and 31 percent of Latinx 3- and 4-year-olds were enrolled in high-quality early learning programs in California.¹ Universal TK can be a considerable step toward leveling the playing field for young children, however, it has to be done in a way that centers equity.

In this equity alert, we share the investments that the budget includes to expand TK and provide seven recommendations for state leaders, local education agencies (LEAs), and community members and advocates to ensure that implementation of universal TK leads to equitable outcomes. It is essential that early learning and care providers, parents (including parents who do not speak English as a primary language), community partners, and advocates are all involved as LEAs build their plans to scale up TK. State and local leaders have a responsibility to leverage this additional funding to bolster stakeholder engagement, partnerships, and data utilization, to strengthen professional development and career opportunities for educators, and to intentionally expand access in evidence-backed ways that support communities that have been the most underinvested.

OVERVIEW OF CALIFORNIA STATE PRESCHOOL PROGRAM (CSPP) IN THE 2021-2022 BUDGET

California has made significant investments in CSPP, a state funded program for 3- and 4-year-olds offered through LEAs, including:

- **Wraparound care:** The Budget encourages schools to provide wraparound care for TK-eligible students using CSPP providers to ensure a full day of developmentally appropriate care and education.
- **Full-day access and reimbursement rates:** The Budget provides \$130 million in Prop 98 General Funds for additional student access and increases reimbursement rates to more closely reflect regional differences the cost of care.

OVERVIEW OF CHILD CARE SLOTS AND REIMBURSEMENT RATES

California is increasing its investment in subsidizing childcare offered in home settings and centers, and care provided privately by families for children 0-3.

- **Reimbursement rates:** Effective January 1, 2022, the Budget raises the rate at which the state reimburses both state-contracted and private child care providers for qualifying families living in poverty.²
- **Child care slots:** The Budget adds over 145,000 child care slots over the next two years.

[Learn more in our recent report](#), *Six Ways School Districts Can Leverage the Local Control Funding Formula for Equity in the Early Years*, about how LEAs can incorporate funding for CSPP in Local Control and Accountability Plans.

OVERVIEW OF UNIVERSAL TK IN THE BUDGET

The 2021-2022 California State Budget includes a series of investments totaling more than \$2.7 billion that will incrementally lead to universal transitional kindergarten by 2025-26. Some of the notable budget provisions include:

- **Planning and implementation grants:** \$200 million in one-time Prop 98 General Funds for planning and implementation grants for all LEAs.
- **Facilities upgrades:** \$490 million for LEAs to build or update facilities to accommodate transitional kindergarten or California state preschool program classrooms.
- **Training for early childhood educators:** \$100 million in one-time Prop 98 General Funds for LEAs to train and increase the number of early childhood educators.
- **Ratio:** New ongoing Prop 98 General Funds beginning in 2022-23 to be used to provide one additional teacher or aide for each TK classroom, reducing adult-to-child ratios from 1:24 to 1:12. Beginning in 2023-24, if there is additional funding, the ratios could be further reduced to 1:10.
- **Parental choice:** A clarification that children eligible for TK can also remain eligible for State Preschool, Head Start, or other state or federal child care programs.



SEVEN RECOMMENDATIONS TO ENSURE EQUITY IN IMPLEMENTING UNIVERSAL TK:

There are several steps that state leaders, local LEA leaders, and advocates can take to center equity with the expansion of TK. Below we outline recommendations for actions these stakeholders can take to center the most marginalized students in TK planning, implementation, and ongoing operations.



PLANNING PHASE

1 Engage stakeholders. It will be crucial to TK's effective implementation that all stakeholders have a voice in how LEAs move forward in increasing TK access.

- **The California Department of Education (CDE)** should provide guidance to LEA leaders, particularly those responsible for early learning programs, emphasizing the need for stakeholder engagement and providing support to the local leaders as they implement this shift.
- **LEA Leaders** should intentionally incorporate the perspectives of various stakeholders in the TK expansion process, including non-LEA early learning and care providers, CSPP instructors, parents of young children, and community advocates.
- **Community-Based Advocates** should reach out to district leaders to inquire about how equity is being centered in TK expansion.



2 Support partnerships between LEAs and early learning providers for TK implementation. Early learning providers have expertise in serving four-year-olds and familiarity with the needs of marginalized children and families. This knowledge can be helpful to LEAs during TK expansion, especially in providing age-appropriate after-school care to children in TK.

- **The legislature** should fund professional development opportunities for LEA leaders to learn from non-LEA early learning providers who have a wealth of knowledge in teaching young children. The legislature should also offer varied options for after-school care and invest in full-day services for children in TK, allowing LEAs to contract with outside early education providers for this care.
- **The CDE** should provide guidance to LEA leaders regarding strategies to partner with community-based early learning programs to provide age-appropriate afterschool care.
- **LEA Leaders** should partner with non-LEA-based preschools, including Head Start and child care centers, to provide full-day services so that marginalized families have varied options to meet specific needs and preferences.
- **Community-Based Advocates** should communicate to LEA leaders that families of color and families living in poverty should have access to full-day programming options from non-LEA providers that are culturally sustaining and meet their unique needs.



3 Develop pathways to build the preschool and TK workforce. Providing TK to all four-year-olds in California will require an additional 8,000 to 11,000 TK teachers, and up to 26,000 additional aides.³ California must be thoughtful about ways to equitably expand the TK teacher workforce, drawing upon the expertise that exists in the diverse early learning and care workforce. Further, the state must ensure that expansion of the TK workforce doesn't negatively impact the preschool workforce. The current CSPP workforce should be bolstered through more pathways to training and certification in preschool instruction, greater investments in recruiting preschool educators, and progress toward pay parity between preschool and TK educators.

- **The California Commission on Teacher Credentialing** should develop simplified pathways for early educators to earn child development permits and credentials to teach TK. This could include giving credit to early educators who demonstrate competencies through the skills and expertise they gained from years of experience.



- **The legislature** should provide funding for preschool teacher recruitment programs, similar to those established to recruit K-12 teachers. They should also establish significantly increased reimbursement rates to bring early educators closer to pay parity with TK educators. The legislature should also fund higher education programs and finance additional early childhood development faculty positions to support TK teacher candidates underrepresented in higher education. Funds could be used to hire and train diverse faculty, to revise courses to be integrated with high-quality clinical practice, and to support flexible locations and times for coursework to make it more accessible to students.^{4 5}
- **LEAs** should leverage the Classified School Employee Teacher Credentialing Program⁶ and professionals in expanded learning programs in order to build a TK teacher pipeline.⁷ They should also use the state Teacher Residency Grant Program⁸ to build residency models specific to TK teachers. This could include allowing the teaching residents to count hours working in a variety of preschool settings with a skilled mentor teacher towards the clinical hours' requirement so they don't have to give up a salary while earning a credential.
- **Community-Based Advocates** should ask their LEA how they plan to staff TK classrooms. Advocates should urge districts to use staffing strategies—including outreach to current early educators and programs like residencies and apprenticeships—that support interested early educators in earning their degree and teaching credentials while gaining rich clinical practice and mentorship from trained professionals, without having to give up a salary.

4 Over the three-year phase-in period, prioritize TK expansion in schools serving larger proportions of children from low-income families, dual-language learners or English learners, families of color, and foster children.

- **LEAs** should prioritize establishing TK offerings in schools and neighborhoods with the highest percentages of the students and families mentioned above as they are most likely to have limited early learning options.
- **Community-Based Advocates** should urge LEA leaders to consider student needs when deciding which schools to first target for new TK classes during the expansion process.



IMPLEMENTATION PHASE

5 Provide professional development to prospective TK staff on instructional practices and curriculum that are at an appropriate developmental and social-emotional level. Four-year-olds have different developmental needs than five-year-olds. TK programs should infuse play-based learning, and not function as the first year of a two-year kindergarten program. We recommend prospective TK teachers and teaching assistants receive training in established, research-based curricular and instructional models so that TK programs are developmentally appropriate for young and diverse children and meet their social-emotional needs.

- **The legislature** must invest in strengthening the training administrators receive about child development, which is not currently required.⁹ This will equip the administrators to understand the appropriate instructional practices for TK classrooms.
- **In preparing for TK expansion, LEAs** should ensure that the professional development they offer to all staff, those who will interact with TK students and those supporting its implementation, is:
 - 1 Developed by early childhood educators and leaders
 - 2 Provided during work hours, so staff are compensated, and substitutes are funded
 - 3 Focused on culturally and linguistically responsive practices, anti-bias/implicit-bias training, and social-emotional learning¹⁰
 - 4 Open to educators across a range of roles and departments in the LEA and to early childhood education providers already supplying services within the LEA's jurisdiction
- **Community-Based Advocates** should ask about the support their LEAs provide to TK teachers, teaching assistants, and administrators to ensure the instruction is culturally and linguistically relevant to students, play-based, and supportive of students' social and emotional development.



ON-GOING TK PROGRAMMING

6 Adopt a lower adult-child ratio. While the 1:12 ratio will increase the quality of TK, children in state preschool programs are in classrooms with a 1:8 ratio. Children learn best from those they have strong relationships with, and lower ratios make it possible for more personalized and individualized engagement between adults and children. Further, the National Institute for Early Education Research has identified the 1:8 ratio as an important indicator of high-quality preschool programs¹¹ and this ratio is also aligned with state requirements for child care centers serving 4-year-olds.¹²

- **The legislature** must fund additional staff for TK classrooms to achieve the 1:10 ratio and eventually move to 1:8.
- **LEAs** should prioritize lowering TK staffing ratios to 1:8, primarily in schools serving marginalized students, even if there is no state requirement.
- **Community-Based Advocates** should urge state and LEA leaders to fully fund the staff needed to achieve the adult-to-child ratios that ensure children receive high-quality learning environments.

7 Collect and share data to monitor the implementation of universal TK. Parents, educators, and the public deserve to know whether investments in expanding TK lead to equitable outcomes. Data should be collected to help identify the impact of TK expansion on children, families, and educators, and determine where additional supports are needed to strengthen the program.

- **The Cradle-to-Career Data System Workgroup and CDE should** convene stakeholders to identify the key metrics that should be collected and incorporated into the cradle-to-career data system.
- **LEAs** should incorporate goals for TK expansion as part of the Local Control and Accountability Plan (LCAP). Further, they should identify actions and expenditures associated with TK, and collect data to measure key metrics regarding the demographics of children served, the teacher workforce, and other measures community members identify. The LEAs should disaggregate the data to identify and address equity gaps.
- **Community-Based advocates** should support the inclusion of TK data in LCAP goals, actions, and metrics.



CONCLUSION

The Education Trust - West appreciates the recent investments to create universal access to TK and the opportunity to provide all four-year-olds in California with access to quality early learning—a solid step toward a truly equitable early learning system in our state. The success of these investments now hinges on the intentionality of state and local decision-makers and education leaders. As the recommendations in this equity alert make clear, the various stakeholders involved in early learning efforts in California must work together to maximize this huge opportunity for California's families, students, and communities.

END NOTES

1. The Education Trust, "Young Learners, Missed Opportunities" <https://edtrust.org/early-childhood-tool/> (retrieved Sept. 2021).
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3. Ashley Williams, et. al., "New Data Shows Early Educators Equipped to Teach TK," (Berkeley, CA: University of California, Berkeley – Center for the Study of Child Care Employment, Aug. 2021), <https://cscce.berkeley.edu/early-educators-equipped-to-teach-tk/>.
4. Madelyn Gardner, et. al. "Promising Models for Preparing a Diverse, High Quality Early Childhood Workforce" (Palo Alto, CA: Learning Policy Institute, Dec. 2019), <https://learningpolicyinstitute.org/product/preparing-diverse-high-quality-early-childhood-workforce-report>.
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6. California Commission on Teaching Credentialing, "Classified School Employee Teacher Credentialing Program," <https://www.ctc.ca.gov/educator-prep/grant-funded-programs/Classified-Sch-Empl-Teacher-Cred-Prog>.
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11. W. Steven Barnett, Karen Schulman, and Rima Shore, "Class Size: What's the Best Fit?" National Institute for Early Education Research Preschool Policy Matters Issue 9, (Dec. 2004), <https://nieer.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/08/9.pdf>.
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